NOT ORPHANED—NEVER ALONE
May 31, 2009
Pentecost Sunday

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Psalm 104:1–9, 31–34
Acts 2:1–13
John 14:15–18

"I will not leave you orphaned."
John 15:18 (NRSV)

Days pass when I forget the mystery.
Problems insolvable . . . jostle for my attention . . .
a host of diversions, my courtiers. . . .
And then once more the quiet mystery is present to me,
the throng's clamor recedes: the mystery
that there is anything, anything at all,
let alone cosmos, joy, memory, everything,
rather than void: and that, O Lord, Creator, Hallowed One,
You still, hour by hour, sustain it.

Denise Levertov
"Primary Wonder" in *Sands of the Well*

As your Spirit came to waiting men and women on Pentecost,
so, O God, come to us today. Awaken us, startle us,
energize us and open our minds, our hearts and spirits
to your lively, loving presence. In Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Felix Salten's children's story, *Bambi*, has been a favorite of children for decades, particularly after Walt Disney's illustrators and animators got hold of it and transformed Bambi and his friends into impossibly cute forest creatures. I loved it many years ago and so did my children: frisky Bambi, a fawn; his protective mother and strong father, a mighty stag (if mostly absent until the chips are down; his friend Thumper, a hyperactive rabbit; his flirtations with Faline, literally "doe-eyed."

There is part of the story that makes children cry, however, when Bambi's mother dies, shot by a hunter, and Bambi finds himself suddenly alone. "Oh my gosh," children think at some point. "What if that happened to me?"

And, of course, it does happen to everyone of us, sooner or later, and when it does it is a psychologically and spiritually important event, a turning point in our life's journey. The psychologists know that one of our primal fears is of abandonment, aloneness, from our birth on. It comes in many shapes and forms.

In a new book, Tom Long tells the story of Jack Casey, a paramedic and ambulance driver. When he was a child, Casey had to have dental surgery that required general anesthesia, and he was terrified. A nurse said to him, "Don't worry, I'll be right beside you, no matter what happens." She was true to her word. When he woke up, she was there and everything was okay.

Years later, now a paramedic and ambulance driver, Casey was called to the scene of a horrific traffic accident. The driver was pinned upside down beneath his pickup truck, terrified, crying out that he was afraid of dying. Casey crawled inside the cab of the truck to reach him even though gasoline was now dripping down on both of them. Rescue workers were beginning to use power tools to cut the metal and one spark would have produced a catastrophe. Jack crawled beside the man and said, "Look, don't worry. I'm right here with you. I'm not going anywhere," exactly what a nurse had told him years before.

When it was all over and the man had recovered, he said to Casey, "You were an idiot: you know that thing could have exploded, and we'd both have been burned up." Jack told him, "I felt I just couldn't leave you" (Thomas G. Long, "Preaching from Memory to Hope," p. 49).

There is in each of us something the therapists sometimes call "separation anxiety." It is a major literary theme, from ancient Greek mythology to Felix Salten's *Bambi*, to modern American fiction. *Home*, Marilynne Robinson's superb novel is about a dutiful daughter, Glory; a wayward son, Jack; and their aging widowed father, who slowly deteriorates as the book proceeds. For years father and son haven't been able to live with each other or without each other. Jack comes and goes, breaks his father's heart, and now, at the end of the book, he's leaving again and tries to say good-bye to his father, who is slowly slipping into dementia.

> "The old man drew his hand into his lap and turned away. 'Tired of it!' he said. Jack nodded. 'Me, too. Bone tired'"—and he leaves.

Separation anxiety: it is the context for the passage of scripture we just heard. The scholars call this section of the Fourth Gospel, the Gospel according to John, the "Farewell Discourses." It is the last evening of his life. Jesus and his disciples are at table, at what would be their Last Supper. It is time for summing up, for final words. The occasion is heavy, pregnant with significance. John gives it several chapters, including Jesus' long

prayer for his disciples, which we thought about last week, in which he asks God to protect them, to keep them together, to give them joy, and to send them into the world in his name. Just before that, he says, “I will not leave you orphaned. I am coming to you.” God is in on this, too. God is in this leaving. God will send God’s own Spirit, the Holy Spirit—here called the Advocate—the very presence of God, to be with them. They will not be alone, even though he will no longer be physically present to them. “I will not leave you orphaned.”

I think his friends must have been in a full separation anxiety. They were acting and sounding like frightened children. “Why are you leaving us, Jesus? Where are you going? Why can’t we come along? Is this all really necessary, this separation we know is coming? Can’t we just slip out into the night and head north, back to the safety of Galilee, and be together for the rest of our lives? We can’t imagine what it will be like without you.”

“I will not leave you orphaned,” Jesus says.

The Bible regularly uses parental language to talk about God, and not exclusively masculine language. God in the Bible is not only a king, a father, but also a mother who cannot, and will not, abandon her nursing child. God in the Bible is like a mother who bends down to pick up and hold her child. Jesus used parental language and images for God, both male and female: a waiting father running down the road to welcome a prodigal son home, a mother hen sheltering her chicks under her wings.

“I will not leave you orphaned,” he tells his frightened, anxious friends—intimately parental.

A decade or so later, the Apostle Paul will begin to think and write about what Jesus means and what difference Jesus Christ makes. He too will use parental language, adoption language. In Christ God adopts us as beloved children. It is a promise and an image we remember every time we baptize an infant: “Gabrielle Lorraine, you are a child of God, sealed by the Spirit in your baptism. You belong to Jesus Christ forever.”

I love the old story about a couple who, unable to become pregnant, adopted a baby girl. And as sometimes happens, immediately became pregnant and had a little boy nine months later. Years afterwards the time came to explain to their daughter that she was adopted. They decided to tell both of their children. They gathered brother and sister and said all the prescribed things: “We chose you to be our daughter. We picked you out. When we saw you we said, that’s just the right baby for us. She’s the one.” Her slightly younger brother, listening in, said, “Can I be adopted, too?”

In a world where many children are unwanted, abused, ignored, abandoned —literally abandoned: newborns left on the doorsteps of hospitals and churches, in railroad stations—adoption is literally redemptive, life giving. Adoptive parents and adoption agencies work hard to give this gift of life and health to a child who in some way may have been abandoned or not wanted.

In that complex and fragile context, how unfortunate that Warner Brothers decided to make and release this summer a despicable motion picture, *Orphan,* which continues and exaggerates a Hollywood tradition of exploiting for profit all the negative stereotypes of adoption, adopted children, adoptive parents.

Particularly despicable is the trailer for the movie's advance promotion: "It must be hard to love an adopted child as much as your own." When a major adoption research organization objected, Warner Brothers apologized but will release the movie in July.

"I will not leave you orphaned," Jesus said. "I will not abandon you. I will be with you forever."

The great teachers of spirituality and devotion down through the centuries remind us of the nurturing parental relationships Jesus had and named with his friends. Sometimes they use strikingly graphic language to make the point.

Julian of Norwich, for instance, in the thirteenth century:

> In our birthing, our mother uses more tenderness for our protection without any comparison. . . . Even if our earthly mother could allow her child to perish, our heavenly mother Jesus cannot allow us that are his children to perish.

In J. Janda's play based on the writings of Julian of Norwich, which Linda Loving presents so magnificently, Julian says,

> Our tender Mother, Jesus,
> Leads us to his breast
> Through his open side
> And into his heart
> That we may know
> True joy,
> True gladness,
> Heavenly bliss.
> With love,
> With courtesy

Our Mother feeds us.

Julian explains—

I say Christ our mother
Because it is a mother who best shows love
As the flower shows color
And the sea and storms show power.

There comes a time in life when you become an orphan. Parents die, and we must go on without them. One day you were someone's daughter or son, and then they're gone. Now we are the parents. Whenever it happens, it is one of life's major events.

And sometimes it happens before the end of life, when a parent descends into dementia or Alzheimer's disease. In many ways it is more difficult, more painful, to become an orphan that way. It is a difficult situation for all —the patient and particularly adult children who assume responsibility for care and, in a very real sense, reverse roles and become their mother's or father's parent.

Linda Rooney, a teacher and author, wrote an article for *America,* the fine Jesuit journal, about her experience with her ninety-year-old mother, whom she is losing to Alzheimer's. She wrote, "Though the physical care required is constant and at times challenging, it is the emotional death that I grieve— the loss of connectedness to the woman who has always been the mainstay of my life." Rooney reflects, "My mother has forgotten me, and every time I look at her my heart weeps. If my mother forgot me, will God? Is there any comfort left in contemplating God's mother love?"

Rooney says there is, and then this intriguing thought: "God's memory is not brain-based but heart-based. It embraces all the nuances of who I am as a human being and stores as only a creator can each cell of my existence." The ancient psalmist wrote:

You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
You are acquainted with all my ways.
You hem me in, behind and before;
You lay your hand upon me.

Rooney says that as she looks at her unresponsive mother, her trust in God, who does not forget any one of us ever, consoles her. "Perhaps, physical co-creator of my being that she is, she, too, stores somewhere within the unconditional love she always gave me, a memory of me so blessed that it need not be spoken to be known. She may not be able to tell me that I am her daughter, but that does not mean she does not remember the child of

her womb" (quoted in *Context,* edited by Martin E. Marty, May 2009). Maybe human memory is not brain-based but heart-based, like God's memory. I think so.

I am not a clinical psychologist, but I believe that human consciousness is so complex and multilayered that somewhere deep inside there remains the best of the person we were and still are, our strongest and deepest loves are still there, regardless of what is happening with the electrical circuits of our brain. Rooney is right, I believe. Her mother has not forgotten her child, even though she can't say it. A Presbyterian minister who has written extensively about Alzheimer's, John Morgan, argues, "Alzheimer's takes away the mind and sometimes the physical ability, but it cannot take away the heart or the soul. Those realities do last forever" ("Trapped Souls," *Presbyterians Today*, July/August 2007).

Pastors learn that at the hospital bedside: sometimes people who don't communicate at all become responsive to words of scripture or hymns that are remembered deeply in the heart. John Morgan reports on a woman who hadn't said a word for six months and who suddenly joined in to sing "Silent Night, Holy Night" at a Christmas Eve service in the chapel of the nursing home.

Physicians and nurses have long known and remind pastors that patients who seem to be comatose continue to hear, and so they learn not to talk about the patient as if he or she were not present and listening, because in all probability he or she is. So in that situation, talk, speak, say "I love you. I'm not going anywhere. Don't be afraid. You are not alone."

I learned early on by experience. In the early days of open-heart surgery, patients returned to recovery, deeply anesthetized, and packed in ice. An elder in the church I was serving—it was the early seventies—had open-heart surgery. His wife asked me to be there with him when it was over. So I was there, and Dick, still packed in ice, looked totally unconscious—if not gone. I didn't know what to do or say. The only thing I could think of was to recite the Twenty-Third Psalm, and that is what I did. "The Lord is my shepherd. . . . Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me." When I returned to visit a few days later, he was in cardiac intensive care, but now awake and alert. I took his hand, and he said, "The Lord is my shepherd." He had heard. We talked about it later. He heard.

I would suggest that even as we lose a parent to Alzheimer's, we are not orphans, because deep within there remains the love that once could express itself. And when we lose a dear one or friend in the same way, the essence of who they were in relationship with us, gone on the surface, remains true and deep in the heart. And when we lose parents, it is our

dearest belief that the relationship that created us, nurtured and blessed us along the way, never ends, because God remembers them and us. Behind all of that is Jesus' promise, "I will not leave you orphaned."

On Pentecost Sunday, the church remembers what is sometimes called the Church's Birthday, the day fifty days after the resurrection, and after the ascension of Jesus, when God's own Spirit, the Holy Spirit, came to Jesus' disciples and followers and filled them with new life, new energy, new spirit. At Pentecost, the church, filled with the Spirit, was born. That is usually what the preacher talks about and we think about on Pentecost. But in a much quieter and intimate sense, Pentecost is the fulfillment of Jesus' promise "I will not leave you orphaned. I am coming to you."

So may this day be a reminder to you that you are not alone, that our most precious relationships are permanent and never end, that even in the darkest hour, when we feel most alone, we are not alone.

May this day remind us that God is with us, that Jesus Christ, our brother, our father, our mother, has promised us that we will not be orphans, not now, not ever. Thanks be to God.

Amen.